

Classrooms with Revolving Doors:
Recommended Practices for
Elementary Teachers
of At-Risk and Highly Mobile Students

Prepared for the National Center for Homeless Education



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Teachers whose classrooms seem to have revolving doors with students entering, withdrawing, and even re-entering throughout the school year, face a variety of challenges in meeting the needs of such highly mobile students and their more stable peers. This information brief highlights some of those challenges and offers recommendations to teachers based on our exploration of the literature and case studies of award-winning teachers with a variety of students in their classrooms who moved frequently. Note: The complete study which includes the literature review and case studies can be found on the NCHE Web site.¹

What's Mobility Got to Do With It?

The term “at-risk” implies that a student faces factors related to the school, society, and family that increase the likelihood of struggling in school, requiring remediation or facing retention, and decrease the likelihood of becoming a high school graduate.² Mobility is a common experience found with other at-risk factors, such as high poverty, homelessness, placement in foster care, or being a child of migrant workers. In fact, one correlate of student achievement is student mobility.³ Changing schools frequently is associated with lower academic achievement, decreased access to the full curriculum, and, ultimately, dropping out of school.⁴

While there are varying definitions of highly mobile, with some researchers suggesting students who change schools more than six times in their K-12 career⁵ and others positing that more than one move per year should be considered highly mobile,⁶ many of our highly mobile students far exceed such rates with multiple moves in any given year. Depending on the reason(s) for moving frequently, highly mobile students can be among those at highest risk for school failure.⁷

Consider the following statistics:⁸

- According to the 2000 census report, 15-18 percent of school-aged children changed residence from the previous year and nearly 12 million children changed their place of residence from 1999 to 2000.
- Poor families move 50% to 100% more often than non-poor families.
- One-half million children attended more than three schools between first and third grade according to a 1994 U. S. General Accounting Office report.
- Approximately 30% of children in low-income families change schools annually versus 8% of children well above poverty.
- In urban schools, the turnover rate for students ranges between 40% and 80% each year.
- Frequent school changes have been correlated with lower academic achievement.

One additional group of highly mobile students was included in our study: children of military parents. Students who are military dependents also face high levels of school mobility; however, one difference between this subgroup and others that have been listed is in the area of academic outcomes. In 2003, Department of Defense (DoD) Schools experienced a transient rate of 35 percent and had a minority student population greater than 50 percent, as well as significant numbers of students receiving free and reduced price meals, yet students scored above the national average at each grade level on a variety of assessment measures.⁹ While dependents of military families share many characteristics with other mobile groups of students, they are not likely to be considered at high risk. Looking at the supports and practices in military communities and schools serving high numbers of military families may provide models that can be adopted/adapted for other highly mobile students.

Qualities of Effective Teachers and the Needs of At-Risk/Highly Mobile Students

The examination of what makes an effective teacher of at-risk and highly mobile students was based on a framework developed by James Stronge and published in *Qualities of Effective Teachers*¹⁰. Through an examination of the extant research related to effective teaching, six essential qualities emerged. These included:

- Teacher Background Characteristics – Effective teachers have knowledge of the content they teach and the pedagogical knowledge needed to teach their specific students and content.
- Teacher as a person – Effective teachers are caring individuals who understand the needs of their students and take the time to get to know their students and their families. They are enthusiastic about learning and convey that enthusiasm to their students.
- Classroom Management and Organization – Effective teachers create a positive learning environment and ensure that the physical environment of the classroom supports rather than detracts from learning.
- Planning and Organizing for Instruction – Effective teachers plan lessons based on important concepts and skills that students need in order to be successful. They use appropriate resources and convey high expectations through meaningful content, rather than focusing on isolated facts.
- Instructional Delivery – Effective teachers deliver high quality instruction through the utilization of myriad instructional approaches to meet the needs of their students.
- Monitoring Student Progress and Potential – Effective teachers monitor student learning, provide feedback to students, and make adjustment to instruction in order to maximize learning.

Central to the idea of what constitutes an effective teacher is the critical focus on meeting the needs of students in the classroom. At-risk and highly mobile students have needs very specific to their own circumstances. Our study focused on three types of needs that students may have:

- ***Affective needs*** – At-risk and highly mobile students have unique affective needs. Due to high mobility and living in an unstable environment, these students may experience frustration, isolation, and lack of motivation to succeed.¹¹ Meeting the affective needs of these students includes helping them develop a sense of belonging, developing intrinsic motivation, and attending to their emotional needs.

And the first thing that I do in the morning is sit down with my children and I think that's the most important thing that I do every day -- the most. Most teachers think it's a waste of time, but if they're not ready to learn, there's no point in me being here.

- ***Academic needs*** - Children who are at-risk of school failure have great academic needs. Students who are highly mobile can take up to half a year to adjust academically to a school move with a larger cumulative effect on achievement with each additional move.¹² In meeting the academic needs of highly mobile students, teachers must have the ability to assess and plan for students needs, deliver instruction effectively, and assess student learning.

Failure of a child is a reflection on you and your teaching methods, not on the child.

- ***Technical Needs*** - These needs include social services, correct grade placement, and support from individuals who work with at-risk/highly mobile students.¹³ According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the very basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter

must be met before the academic and affective needs can be addressed.¹⁴ When students are present for short time periods, basic, academic, and affective needs may have to be addressed concurrently. Effective teachers address student needs prior to the students arriving in the classroom, when students arrive in the classroom, while they are in the classroom, and even when they leave.¹⁵

If they're hungry, I have oatmeal in the class that we can heat up in the microwave.

Several themes related to effective teaching and working with at-risk/highly mobile students emerged from our examination of the qualities that make an effective teacher and the needs of their students. The case studies of state and/or national award-winning teachers revealed that these teachers:

- ***Cared about their students*** both in terms of the unique challenges faced by students and in terms of ensuring that their students acquired essential knowledge and skills while they were in their classrooms. Caring included knowing students *and* providing support for student success.

“What motivates the students to stay in that class is the personal connection to the teacher and I make it a point to learn about my students as learners. I do not teach English; I teach students.”

- ***Maintained a caring, positive learning environment*** by ensuring that all students were valued.

That's the environment that I want – that it's safe to explore ideas and it's safe to change your mind. . .

... if you moved ten times in your five years, you know more about more places than anybody in here – there's more to write about. If your parents go to jail regularly, you know about something none of us know. If you're homeless, you know more ways to use scissors than anyone ever thought of. They have a lot of knowledge.

- **Believed that they could make a difference** in the lives of their students and continually reflected on their own professional practice in meeting the needs of their students.

I take ownership into their learning process and involvement and there should be no question on their part that I'm a player and that they don't stand alone. And I think that makes a big difference.

- **Held high expectations** for their students through meaningful and engaging instruction and through believing that their students could and would succeed.

While I know it's sometimes out of their control, I don't let students get out of homework – they may pay tickets [incentive program to encourage students work completion and appropriate behavior], they may start it in class or participate in afternoon programs to get it finished.

...I just do not believe in can't and won't.

Recommended Practices

It isn't enough to chronicle the educational challenges faced by students who move a lot. The essential question is: What can we do to help them succeed in school? The following pages provide practical ideas on how to meet the needs of elementary at-risk and highly mobile students. Although these suggested practices are specific to elementary they may also be appropriate for secondary students. These ideas are divided into three categories of student needs: affective, academic, and technical. Within each category, ideas are further subdivided into practices that can be employed in advance of receiving students, when a new student arrives in the classroom, while the student is enrolled in the school, and when the student leaves. Dividing ideas into the three area needs and further subdivision suggest that each idea is discrete. However, it is important to recognize that the teachers included in our case studies saw much overlap in needs and how planning, instruction, and assessment were woven together. While a practice may be listed as meeting academic needs, it could easily support affective needs, as well.

Affective Needs

In advance of the student arriving...

- Be caring, dedicated, motivating, encouraging, nurturing, supportive, and respectful.
- Believe you can make a difference. High teacher self-efficacy translates into direct actions with students.
- Focus on creating a stable, caring learning environment to counter the stress of instability outside the classroom.

- Get to know the challenges that your students face. For example, one teacher strategically selected professional development opportunities that focused on students similar to hers who lived in poverty and were highly mobile.
- Get to know the community in which you teach. One teacher would attend local yard sales and always find something she could use in her class. It allowed her to meet parents and demonstrate her interest and respect.
- If you use a community building activity at the beginning of the year (e.g., puzzle pieces, classroom quilt, student numbers), have extra parts ready for new students to complete and add when they arrive.
- Consider mini-units or book studies around the theme of high mobility.¹⁶
- Establish and maintain a consistent routine so that students know what to expect and can share expectations when new students arrive.

When the student arrives...

- Assign a buddy to “show the new student the ropes.” Classroom ambassadors can provide tours of the school, support learning the rules and procedures, and begin to develop friendships with classmates.
- Take a few minutes to welcome the new student officially to the class. (DoD schools have a practice known as “Hale and Farewell”, where arrivals and departures are celebrated. They may even keep a bulletin board with all the students from the year and list all the places students had lived.)
- Create a “New Kids on the Block” club – special lunches with the teacher, counselor, principal, or other school staff can provide another “getting to know you” opportunity.

- If you know the student’s name in advance, add the name to classroom charts and label the desk and cubby if other students’ are labeled.
- Model respect by always calling students by their names. Do your best to pronounce the name correctly.¹⁷
- Handle disruptive situations in a private and respectful manner. Be a “warm demander” – maintain a calm, quiet management style coupled with high expectations for behavior and academics.

While the student is enrolled...

- Commit to student success by arriving early and/or staying late with students who need additional time with you.
- Be sensitive to a student’s comfort in leaving his/her desk or belongings. For a child living in very crowded surroundings, sitting at a desk may be more comfortable than gathering on the rug. A child living in a shelter may have all his/her special belongings in his/her backpack. Offer a secure location to keep those items such as a locked desk. (One school secretary used the office’s locked supply room for this purpose.)
- Take time to talk with the student and build a relationship. Even small comments such as, “I noticed that your binder has a horse on it. Do you like horses?” can open a dialogue and show that you are looking beyond the child as a student to the child as a person.¹⁸
- Incorporate techniques that build a sense of classroom community. Classroom management strategies such as classroom meetings and group problem solving give students the opportunity to learn important negotiating and teamwork skills. Instructional techniques such as cooperative learning can ensure students are included, and, with appropriate attention, can encourage appropriate social skills.

I use a lot of cooperative learning activities with high student engagement. There's less down time and fewer behavior problems. I try to bring in the outside world, make connections between what I'm teaching and the students' lives. I use a lot of Kagan's strategies. It's important to learn that you can depend on someone else to help you. This helps with discipline, too.

When the student leaves...

- Create a farewell “memory book” with digital photos, student writing, and illustrations.
- Provide the departing student with self-addressed, stamped stationery to write back to the class.
- Provide the departing student with a phone card so you can be called when the family has settled in a new place.
- If the student leaves without notice, compile your “farewell packet” and leave it with the student’s records so it can be delivered when records are requested. Include your students in writing/illustrating their farewells to the student who has left.
- Send a letter from the teacher introducing the student to his/her new teachers. If you know the student is leaving, give the letter to the child and include a copy with the student’s school records that will be sent.
- If the student knows what school he or she will be attending next, help the student get information about the school to ease anxiety. With the expansion of the Internet, many schools now have Web sites with maps, photographs, and current events. (Integrate academic standards by comparing and contrasting and making predictions.)

Academic Needs

In advance of the student arriving...

- Seek the content knowledge of subject matter and pedagogical skills needed to serve your students (licensure, ongoing professional development tailored to yours and your students' needs).
- Have extra copies of materials for current units prepared for new students.
- Plan mini-units that can be completed within limited time frames.
- Focus on literacy. Have resources on a variety of reading levels that address the same content and topics.
- Have your rules and procedures printed so they can be distributed to students who were not in class during the first few weeks of school when such items are a main focus.

When the student arrives...

- Review any student records that arrive with the student that provide information about previous learning.
- Use curriculum based measures (CBM)¹⁹ to determine current skill levels quickly.
- Assess student interests to hook them into learning. A K-W-L (know-want to learn-learned) chart can be used to identify student questions to be explored as a topic. The start of the day chat described by one of our teachers under *Affective Needs* is another source of information about student interests.
- If space allows, set up different learning areas in the room to accommodate different learning styles.

- Use the entry of a new student as a logical break to review rules and procedures with the whole class. Effective classroom management creates more time for instruction and learning.²⁰

While the student is enrolled...

- Provide relevant, meaningful, challenging learning opportunities that focus on essential knowledge and skills.
- Provide opportunities for one-on-one or small group tutoring, which have been shown to increase student achievement.²¹
- Use a variety of teaching strategies and change strategies when one is not working. On average, the teachers we observed used eight instructional activities per hour of instruction, meaning that students were engaged with different activities and at different times. The change in activities among the teachers wasn't simply for the sake of change; rather, the teachers had a clear agenda and vision regarding what activities they wanted to use, when, and under what circumstances.
- Include teacher-student talk and student-student talk.
- Model, model, and model what students should know and be able to do.
- Be flexible with lesson plans, allowing for the give and take of student learning. Some students may need more time with a concept while others may be ready to move on to the next concept; thus, plan for differentiation.
- Maintain student engagement by being engaged yourself ... make frequent eye contact with students, use students' names, and encourage student discussion.

- Allow students to complete homework at school, focusing only on critical homework assignments. Remember that some of your students do not have the resources to complete homework at home.²²
- Assign homework that is practice, rather than grappling with new concepts. If students leave the classroom not knowing how to write a thesis statement, they will certainly not be able to write one by themselves.
- Assess in small increments, providing feedback for improvement.
- Use ongoing assessment to inform instruction continuously – both planning for tomorrow and adjusting during lessons.
- Keep work samples and CBM records to document progress. Such portfolios can provide the next teacher with useful insights.
- Use quiet reminders to shape appropriate behavior – proximity, a hand on a shoulder, eye contact.
- Be consistent in enforcing rules and procedures. Structure will assist students in acclimating to a new classroom.

When the student leaves...

- If you have prior knowledge that the student is leaving, create a portfolio showing student work and the knowledge and skills the student has learned so that the next teacher will have an understanding of where the student is academically. If the student has a history of multiple moves, assume that a move will occur. Starting a portfolio when the student enters your class can ensure the teacher will be ready should a move occur.
- Send the portfolio of student's work with the student. Maintain a duplicate copy should the items become lost during the move.

- If the student leaves without notice, give the portfolio described above to the school staff so that it can be sent to the next school when school records are requested.

Technical Needs

In advance of the student arriving...

- Have extra school supplies on hand.
- Have wholesome snacks or food in the classroom, as some students may come to school hungry.
- Know and coordinate with the school staff who can provide additional support to your students: school counselors, social workers, school nurse, etc. Coordinate with local homeless education liaisons for those students who appear to be experiencing homelessness. These support staff can link children and youth with services and make referrals to address technical needs.
- Get to know outside resources such as community/school liaisons, Boys and Girls Clubs organizers, youth centers, and other after school programs so that you can seek help when needed.
- Get to know the community in the school's residency area. Visit local shelters where your students might reside.
- Organize a tutoring program to meet the needs of students in the community. For example, a school in an urban, high-need area could partner with a large, local business to establish in-school tutoring opportunities for students.
- Be familiar with laws that may affect school mobility for the students you teach. Federal legislation exists for high poverty, homeless, and migrant populations. State laws may offer support for children in foster care.

When the student arrives ...

- Review student records to make a determination about the student’s needs so that you can contact school officials or community agencies. “The most at-risk students with multiple indicators for dropout are often located in the highest poverty areas in unstable homes and community environments, and require more than academic, structural, and system-wide interventions.”²³

While the student is enrolled ...

- Keep running records on students indicating needs when they are with you. Do they frequently come to school hungry or without proper clothing?
- Provide students with coats from a coat closet or meet other needs they may have.
- Hold parent meetings in places the parents may be likely to attend (e.g., community centers, local churches, homeless shelters, etc.).
- Locate individuals to serve as interpreters in parent conferences.

I have become friends over the years with a lot of the parents - even though we don't speak the same language. One girl said, "How can you be friends with my Mom when you don't even speak the same language?" I said, "We speak the language of love, we both love you!"

When the student leaves ...

- Notify school officials and/or community agencies if a student who is highly mobile has not been in school for a few days.

Concluding Thoughts

Whether they have a day, a week, a month, or a year with a child, teachers play a key role in the lives of their students. Effective teachers are able to blend the academic, affective, and technical needs of their highly mobile students across their planning, instruction, and assessment to make the most of the time they have with students. These teachers are aware of school and community resources that link families to stabilizing supports and lessen mobility. Effective teachers also recognize that some mobility is beyond their control. So, they arrange classrooms that can integrate new students quickly, involve ongoing assessment and feedback loops in instruction to capture even small gains, and prepare for the possible exit of the student to ease the transition for both the student who moves and the peers that remain.

In our study of effective teachers, we asked the teachers we interviewed and observed to create a metaphor that would describe how they view working with at-risk and/or highly mobile students. One teacher who teaches highly mobile high poverty and homeless students in an elementary gifted program provided this metaphor:

I think they are jewels in the rough. And when I say this, it's because they have great treasures hidden inside. And when I say there are treasures hidden inside – if you moved ten times in your five years, you know more about more places than anybody in here – there's more to write about. If your parents go to jail regularly, you know about something none of us know. If you're homeless, you know more ways to use scissors than anyone ever thought of. They have a lot of knowledge. They may not have TV, they may be great little artists that are hiding it somewhere... Those children are hidden and sometimes you have to work really, really hard to get inside and you never really know what's in there... Because sometimes it might be a ruby, then it might be a diamond. There's no telling what's inside. And you have to use a really bright light to find out

what's inside because you have to look really hard. You've got to be really open to what you find.

Another question we asked of teachers is what advice they would have for new teachers. A teacher who taught high school students at the highest risk for dropping out of school had this to say:

Be flexible. You need to UNDERSTAND the life of an at-risk kid. Some teachers don't understand and write them off. One size does not fit all. You have to look at the individual and do what you can. You have to understand that when the student doesn't bring in homework, it's not a hit against you, it's the environment. You need a positive attitude. The students are depending on you to learn. You set the tone. You need to leave your personal issues at the door and remember that the teacher is an important role model.

The metaphor and the advice demonstrate what we found with all the teachers included in our study – effective teachers of at-risk and highly mobile students are committed to and passionate about meeting the needs of their students and are always striving to increase their own effectiveness.

Endnotes and Resources

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- ¹⁶ For a sampling of children's books and activities, see Appendix C of Popp, Stronge, & Hindman, 2003. In addition, the Project HOPE-Virginia website has a *Bibliography of Homeless Education Resources* which contains five pages of children's literature related to homelessness and poverty and another page of young adult literature at <http://web.wm.edu/hope/infobrief/bibliography.pdf>.
- ¹⁷ Howlett, B. (1993). *I'm new here*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. This children's book, appropriate for primary grades, tells the story of a young girl from El Salvador named Jazmin who enters elementary school not speaking English. The teacher mispronounces her name as "Jasmine" rather than the Spanish pronunciation Hazmeen which adds to Jazmin's feelings of not belonging.
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